

Liminality

by Thermit

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Summary: "Youâ€!" she snarled, turning so quickly Hiccup didn't have a chance to jerk his head back. In one abrupt motion, they were so close their lips would have touchedâ€| if not for the helmet that covered his face. Short little drabbles where a Viking and a Princess dance around the venn diagram of friendship and admiration and that little (deep) space in between.

1. Your Favorite

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****Your Favorite****

"What are you smiling at?" Hiccup asked sourly as he and Merida faced each other. The music hadn't started yet but dancers had already begun lining up. He and Merida were only one pair of many. The drums began and Hiccup clumsily began moving to the music. Merida's smile only widened and Hiccup scowled at her. Normally, Merida hated dances and she often dragged Hiccup off to another gods-forsaken adventure so she could avoid them. But Hiccup had the ill luck to win the sprinting competition in her feast (nobody was more surprised than he) and so won the honor of naming his favorite to begin the annual dance. Hiccup knew very few female Highlanders to begin with and knew a grand total of one who didn't hate his guts for being a Viking. Naturally, he had named Merida.

"Maybe I'm just smiling because you chose me as the favorite," Merida said coyly, taking his hand and circling around him. Merida wasn't actually bad at these Thor-blasted Highland dances, damn her. Her skill with the blade translated to her skill on the dance floor. She moved with grace and confidence. Hiccup felt all the worse for being

her partner. The only experience Hiccup had ever had with dancing was the rhythmless stomping and ungainly swaying that sometimes occurred when too many villagers drank too much spirits and Gobber could be persuaded to play his pipes. The only reason Hiccup knew this dance at all was because Elinor had very politely and pointedly ask Hiccup to join Merida's dancing lessons, knowing perhaps that Merida would be less likely to run away if her partner-in-crime was chained to the same lesson she was.

"Everyone chooses you," Hiccup said, scoffing. They hooked arms and swung in a half circle. Hiccup was surprised to find that he wasn't doing as bad as he expected. Perhaps Elinor's lessons had paid off, after all. Huh. He turned and pulled Merida to him. "You're always the favorite."

"Aye," said Merida, pushing into his space. The smile was still firmly in place and Hiccup had a strong suspicion that she was laughing at this fishbone of a Viking who probably looked like he was having a seizure on the dance floor. Before he could make a comment, she thunked their heads together gently before she pushed away from him and said, "But maybe, just maybe, I like being _your _favorite."

Author's Note: This is part of a larger Mericcup fanfiction that I'm writing/collaborating with some friends. Given that it's probably going to take me months to get it out (seeing as I'm trying to write it all before releasing it), I figured I'd let myself write the fluff as it comes and let other people enjoy it too. Let me know what you think! I welcome reviews and constructive criticism.

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2. The One Who Matters

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****The One Who Matters****

"He's not much like his father, is he?" Elinor observed. She had been quiet for so long and Fergus so intent on his wine that he almost missed the question. The King swallowed his drink, blinking. "Hiccup, I mean," the Queen clarified. She glanced sidelong at the gangly Viking youth sitting on a bench not too far from the thrones set up on the outside podium. The lanky teen was slouched down in his place as if trying to hide from the people around him. But his green eyes were alert, watching and taking in everything with an almost cat-like intensity.

Fergus snorted and bit into the leg of a roasted fowl. "No, not like Stoick at all," he said. "I'd say more like the opposite, to be honest. I don't remember Valhallarama being a delicate woman either."

The Queen grew still at the mention of her once closest friend. Elinor had taken Valhallarama's untimely death hard, but he hoped that the passing of the years softened the hurt. Perhaps not. "No," Elinor shook her head, "She wasn't. But that's not what I meant." Elinor tapped her finger slowly against her armrest.

There was a shout of laughter from the dance floor and the Queen looked to see Merida dancing with all three of her brothers. Her young sons were giggling madly as they whirled like fairies around their older sister. Unlike Hiccup, Merida could scarcely be dismissed or ignored. She stood tall and proud, with vibrant fiery hair and bold blue eyes that feared nothing and no one. For all that Elinor's eldest child hated certain parts of being a princess, she certainly had the bearings of one. Well, no, not a traditional princess, maybe. Perhaps a touch of a defiant warrior. Everywhere she went, she drew the eyes of onlookers and it was one pair of eyes in particular that troubled Elinor.

Many eyes watched Merida. As the princess of Clan DunBroch, it was only to be expected. But it wasn't the eyes of the lords and their young sons who gazed at her daughter with bemusement, confusion and stung pride that troubled Elinor nor even the eyes of the Roman General who gazed at Merida with the dispassionate fascination and calculation of a man who moved pieces across a gaming board. No, it was the eyes of the young Viking who tried hard to blend in that troubled Elinor the most. Mainly because, even as Hiccup tried hard not to attract attention, he drew the attention of the only one who mattered.

After the song ended, Merida's brothers escorted her back to the sidelines before scampering off in search of food. Merida barely glanced at young Lord MacGuffin who called out softly, nodded to young Lord Dingwall and smiled politely to young Lord Macintosh. Elinor frowned. She knew all three boys had asked her to dance. Merida parted the crowd, waving aside friendly calls from important lords and resident castellans, and instead threw herself on the bench beside Hiccup.

"What is it, love?" asked Fergus at his wife's silence. "Something troubling you?"

"The boy troubles me," Elinor said softly. The Queen frowned, watching the pair. At Merida's approach, Hiccup had straightened up from his slouch, looking alert and pleased. Merida said something and the boy threw his head back and laughed loudly. It was startling to see the changes wrought on the boy's face. Merida melted Hiccup's caution and reserve. With his face open and animated, Elinor could see why so many of the young girls in the castle whispered and giggled as he passed. Similarly, something of the cool hardness, the distant mask Merida wore, melted in the warmth of Hiccup's regard. Merida was charismatic and friendlyâ€"but ultimately distant. Years of grilling the girl hard about the nature of politics and diplomacy had formed that mask, Elinor knew with some regret. But it was only ever with Hiccup that the mask was put away in the open. Real warmth and genuine affection softened Merida's wild, harsh beauty and made herâ€"Elinor realized with a stab of alarmâ€"truly lovely.

"Why?" asked Fergus, following her gaze. Hiccup whispered something to Merida who leaned back and laughed in delight. She swung her legs beneath her and put her hands down on either side to steady her.

Their laughter died abruptly as they glanced at something between them. Elinor shifted in her seat and realized that when Merida had put her right hand down, she hadn't noticed Hiccup's hand already splayed on the bench beside her. Now their hands were on top of one another. Hiccup blushed furiously and drew his hand away, muttering something. Merida blinked and looked down, biting her lip. There was a moment's pause between them. "What is it?" Fergus asked his wife. "What do you see?"

Merida got up abruptly and stood in front of Hiccup, hands on her hips. Hiccup frowned up at her. She was saying something the royal pair couldn't hear, but it became obvious when Merida held out her hand to her friend and jerked her head to the dance floor. Hiccup shook his head emphatically. Merida said something in response that ended with Hiccup smirking but still shaking his head. The Roman General interrupted their conversation. He bowed formally to Merida and said something neither Elinor nor Fergus could hear. Merida nodded graciously enough but Elinor could tell genuine distress on her daughter's face even if none of it showed on her expression. Elinor was about to go down and interrupt when Hiccup took Merida's hand, bowed low over it and said something. Merida blinked in astonishment at Hiccup before grinning a wide, toothy grin—the sun blazing in the open after being briefly blocked a cloud. She ignored the Roman General, took Hiccup's arm and the two walked to the dance floor.

The crowd gave the pair a wide berth, some bowing, others greeting. It should have made Merida scowl and Hiccup shrink in discomfort. Elinor knew that from past experience. But they didn't.

Many eyes watched Merida, and Elinor knew that soon, many eyes would watch Hiccup, son and heir to Stoick the Vast of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe. But for now, it didn't matter. For now, the boy and the girl only had eyes for each other.

"Ah," said Fergus, blinking. "I see what you mean."

Author's Note: Again, this is part of a larger Mericcup fanfiction that I'm writing. This was originally posted on tumblr and edited (mostly the end). Let me know what you think! I welcome reviews and constructive criticism.

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3. Come Away With Me

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****Come Away with Me****

"You've got to get her off the cliff," Sima gasped as soon as Hiccup made his way from the Viking longship just arrived at DunBroch to the

cliffside by the loch. Under Sima's directions, they had waved aside the approaching Viking longship and hailed Hiccup to come to the beach. "She said she needed some air; I didn't realize she meant to climb all the way up. Oh, milord, _please_."

"I'm not a lord, Sima," Hiccup said, wincing. The Viking towered over Sima and most of the soldiers with them. But what the boy exceeded in height, the soldiers more than made up for in girth and arms. Hiccup was dressed in the queer leather armor he often favored whereas the soldiers around them were clad head to toe in chainmail hauberks, iron helmets, spears, swords and shields. That made the picture far more comical. These grown men with their big weapons and armor were either dancing on tenterhooks or trying (and failing) to climb up the _Crone's Tooth_, a small cliff that jutted over the loch.

"_Please get her off the edge!_" Sima said, tears filling her eyes. She just knew she would be blamed for this. Merida wasn't allowed to ride Angus for the week so Sima thought that a quick walk around the loch would be a safe alternative. After all, how much trouble could the princess get to walking with a dozen of her father's men looking after her? Merida disappeared soon after and the soldiers only realized she was on the _Crone's Tooth_ after an hour of searching. Soldiers climbed the small cliff, trying to coax the young princess down. First, Merida shouted at them to leave her alone, then had threatened to dive into the water if they came any closer. After that, she seemed set on the idea of jumping and only Sima's tears forced her to stop.

Hiccup tilted his head. His grass-green eyes squinted in the light as he spotted the red curls that belonged to his friend high up on the cliff. There were soldiers shouting at her but she paid them no mind. Unexpectedly, Hiccup laughed.

"It's not funny," Sima said, fury and anguish in her voice in equal measures.

"I'm sorry, Sima," Hiccup said, chuckling. "Butâ€¦ can't you see how ridiculous that looks?" From high above, soldiers shouted as Merida slipped then regained her balance. Sima groaned. "Okay, okay," Hiccup said, "I promise I'll get her off the edge." The Viking boy in his strange leather armor then started climbing swiftly up. Sima followed as best she could though she hated heights. The boy was surprisingly nimble for one with a metal leg. It squeaked and groaned as Hiccup climbed up and soon the boy outpaced Sima and the soldiers who'd climbed ahead of him.

By the time Sima drew herself near the edge, Hiccup was already just a few feet away from the princess.

"Good morning," Merida said as politely as if she'd just greeted Hiccup at the breakfast table.

"Fancy meeting you here," Hiccup said wryly, stopping. This far up, the wind over the loch blew fiercely around them. Merida's dark blue gown, tartan belt and red curls lifted in the wind as she glanced back. Her cheeks were ruddy from the exercise and her eyes glittered in amusement.

"Feeling up for a morning swim?" Merida asked, nodding to the blue loch glittering below.

"It's a bit high, don't you think?" Hiccup said, stepping beside her and looking down.

The princess only turned to him and smiled. She edged closer to Hiccup, that wicked smile on her lips, and whispered, "We've jumped further." Sima would never have been able to hear but for the wind carrying the words through the air. Sima felt a bit light-headed, thinking, _Had she gone mad? Jumped further?_

Unwillingly, Hiccup smiled. "There were â€| extenuating circumstances," he allowed. Their faces were so close now, eyes trained only on each other. Sima was gesturing furiously for him to grab hold of the princess, but Hiccup's arms remained loosely at his side.

"Come away with me," the princess said, plea and command and enticement all rolled into one tone. Hiccup swallowed, eyes darkening. Abruptly, Sima felt like she was intruding on something _very_ private.

"I'll jump with you," Hiccup said and Sima watched Merida smile in triumph. "If you jump from the ledge below this one." Merida frowned suspiciously as Hiccup backed away. Sima swallowed her own panic and glanced down. The ledge was perhaps ten feet lower than the actual cliff. It was still a high jump but perhapsâ€|

"Liar," Merida accused, brow furrowed. "You're just trying to get me down like all the rest."

Hiccup smiled at her, "Am I?" He began unbuckling his strange armor and tossing it to a nearby soldier. With every step Hiccup took toward the ledge below, Hiccup stripped off his armor.

Sima watched the princess's eyes widen at Hiccup's actions. "What are you doing?" Merida hissed. A fierce blush rose in the princess's cheeks, but she didn't look away.

"I don't know about you," Hiccup said. "But drying leather armor is a pain. If I'm gonna swim in the loch with you, I'd prefer to do it in something that'll dry faster."

Sima would have shouted at him to stop. She could already hear the queen's reprimanding stare and censure. But the princess did none of those things. Merida only chuckled reluctantly and began to follow him. Sima wished feverishly they would stop looking so intently in each other's eyes. Sima couldn't understand why but that made the whole scene ten times more embarrassing. But perhaps that was the key, Sima thought. Hiccup seldom looked away from Merida's eyes and Hiccup was the only one who could sway the princess's wild moods.

Finally, Hiccup was dressed only in his dark green tunic and brown trousers. The sun shone hotly behind him and outlined his body against the thin fabric of the tunic. Sima realized that he was as fit as any sailor or rider Sima had ever seen. It reminded Sima that he wasn't a boy, not really. Hiccup was a man grown for all his gentle demeanor.

"It was a joke," Merida said suddenly, pausing. Her voice had less of

the fierce wildness in it and more of the human, the girl, no, the woman. It gave Sima hope that Hiccup had talked her down out of her mad idea. "I really did just want some air. But everyone kept shouting at me not to jump." The princess shook her head and her curls bounced around her. The light glittering from the lake and the cloudy sky turned the princess's hair into a living flame. "Everyone's always telling me to do this or that or not do this or don't do that." The princess straightened, chin lifting and her eyes seemed like chips of a hard blue sky. "I won't be trapped or cagedâ€"not for anyone!"

"I'd pity the fool who tried," Hiccup said sincerely. His eyes flicked behind her, "Merida!"

Merida darted forward. The soldier stealthily making his way to the princess reached out and just barely brushed Merida's skirt as she slipped away, swift as the wind. Then the two were off. Together, the princess and Viking climbed down to the second ledge amidst the shouts and orders of nearby soldiers. Sima didn't even bother trying. Once the princess was in her moods, she was difficult to stop. Once both of them were in their moods, they were unstoppable. The two paused at the edge, looking down. Sima wasn't sure who reached first. But when Hiccup and Merida jumped, their hands were joined. Hiccup gave a loud yell as he jumped but Merida's laughter rang true and clear. They hit the surface with a splash. Sima watched with baited breath. A few minutes later, both broke the surface. Merida waved up at Sima before turning to splash Hiccup who spluttered.

****Author's Note:**** Sima is a minor character of my own creation. In my fic, she's the equivalent of a handmaiden/lady-in-waiting.

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4. Extenuating Circumstances

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* * *

><p>Extenuating Circumstances

* * *

><p>"Is it still following us?" Merida called out ahead of him.<p>

Behind Hiccup, he could hear the furious boar crashing through the undergrowth. Hiccup sped up. "What do you think?" he snapped back, breathless. They had been running for at least ten minutes, Hiccup was sure, and he was grateful that he had spent so much time with

Toothless. Twelve-year-old Hiccup could not have kept up with the princess's sprint but a Hiccup who did nothing but ride Toothless for the better part of six years could cope. Still, they could not run forever. If they didn't come up with something soon, they were going to get gored. In retrospect, splitting with the royal hunting party to strike out on his own was a terrifically bad idea especially when the princess decided to go with him.

That was the problem with princesses, Hiccup thought, disgruntled. They did what they pleased, didn't care whose plan they ruined, and carried their own baggage. This princess's baggage came in the form of three suitors who couldn't seem to leave the girl well enough alone no matter how hard she dodged, sidestepped, or flat out ignored them. What Hiccup hoped would be a quiet solo mission to see if the tracks he'd seen the night before came from a timberjack became a noisy party of five with Osgar Macintosh running a commentary on Hiccup's (poor) tracking skills, Niall Dingwall humming a maddening tune that Hiccup just knew would get stuck in his head, and Alan MacGuffin crashing through the undergrowth. Merida hissed at them to keep quiet; Hiccup had long given up on it.

It was only through sheer dumb luck that they found the boar the royal party was hunting.

Hiccup almost welcomed the beast if only to shut all of them up. That welcome quickly vanished when they realized that none of them had the weapons to deal with the beast and the boar was as mean as it was stupid. Hiccup shouted at the suitors to climb up trees while he distracted it, but it was Merida's arrow to the boar's side that finally took the beast's attention from Niall Dingwall. At that point, the only thing to do was run.

"Och, this is not how I wanted to do this," Merida said, before shouting, "Come on. Follow me!" The red curls ahead of him veered sharply to the left. As if Hiccup had any other choice but to follow. The young Viking swore as his prosthetic limb caught on some foliage and he wrenched it free as quickly as he could. Merida didn't wait up. The trees were starting to thin as the ground sloped upward. Hiccup hoped that meant they were near some settlement. Ahead of him, the princess slowed. She took out an arrow from her quiver, attached it quickly to a rope and let it fly. The arrow embedded itself on the trunk of a tree nearly to the top of a steep ridge. The princess tied the end of the rope to a nearby tree and began using the rope to negotiate the steep slope.

Hiccup allowed himself to feel a trickle of admiration for the girl's quick thinking before the boar bellowed behind him. Hiccup ducked just in time as debris from the boar's crashing through the undergrowth sailed overhead. Without missing a beat, Hiccup followed her example. The boar's enraged bellowing grew fainter and fainter the higher Hiccup got. The ground was soft and his prosthetic limb caught more than once. But the thought of the boar's sharp tusks only spurred him faster. Then Merida's hand was there helping him negotiate the last steep climb.

The Viking flopped over the damp grass and soft earth. His limbs burned from their exertion and his lungs took in great gasps of air. A constant, cool breeze blew over his face.

"You all right?" Merida asked, leaning over him.

Hiccup opened his eyes and stared at her in a daze. She really was quite pretty, a distant part of Hiccup's mind noted, ignoring the roaring in his ears at the closeness of her. Even though her hair was windswept, sweat trickled down her brows and her clothes were dirty from their sprint. But her eyes were bright and the ghost of a smile loomed behind her lips like the moon hiding behind some clouds. "You're enjoying this," Hiccup said, wonder and accusation in his tone.

Merida stiffened before walking away. "Iâ€¦ I don't know what you're talking about," she said, crossing her arms and looking down the slope.

Hiccup sat up, gazing at the princess. That was a lie if ever Hiccup heard one. For the millionth time, the Viking wondered at the strange puzzle the princess of the Highlands presented. That strange feeling surged in his chestâ€”dual impulses vying for control. Natural curiosity urged him to find out more, to question, to learn. The sensible part of his mind warned that she burned too bright; she'd blind him if he came too near.

"Uhh, Hiccup, you might want to see this," Merida said.

Hiccup blinked. He'd been so distracted by Merida that he hadn't even realizedâ€”the roar of the beast. "Oh you've _got _to be joking," Hiccup said, scrambling to stand beside the girl. The boar was rapidly making its way up the slope. Its hooves sunk deep into the soft earth and it gnashed its teeth at them. It would reach them in a few minutes. Hiccup whipped around, looking for another place to hide but there was none.

Merida had lead them to a cliffside. The trees that were in reach were far too slender to support either of them much less withstand the boar's tusks. The small clearing they were in sloped sharply downwards to the boar; the other side dropped abruptly into nothing. A roaring river bordered one side that fell away into a waterfallâ€”the biggest he'd seen yet in the Highlands.

"What are you doing?" Merida asked as Hiccup walked closer to the river. "We can't swim. We'll drown!"

Hiccup snapped back, "It was your bright idea to lead us here. You think of something then!"

"Bright idea?" Merida repeated. "You're the one who decided to hunt on your own without a weapon but for that silly dagger! We wouldn't be here if you had something that could actually kill a boar!"

"I wouldn't need a weapon for a boar if you hadn't been following me!"

"I _accompanied_ you because you needed protection!"

"Oh _swell_ job!"

The boar bellowed. Merida and Hiccup whipped around to face it. Its nose was peeking over the edge, but it seemed to have difficulty making it up the last few feet. It surged up once, its short legs scrabbling for purchase on level ground before it disappeared over

the edge again. Hiccup's heart leapt into his throat and he backed away hastily. _Think, Haddock, think_, he urged himself. _Boar on one side, cliff on the other, drowning on the other side_. _What would Toothless do if he couldn't fight, couldn't swim, couldn'tâ€¦ jump?_

Hiccup strode towards the edge of the waterfall. The water thundered past him and dropped a distance of about 25 meters into a large loch. He couldn't see any rocks below, but the mist could be hiding any number of things. He'd fallen furtherâ€¦ but then again, he'd also been much higher up in the sky and accompanied by the fastest dragon known to Vikings.

"You're mad," Merida whispered.

Hiccup turned to her. She was watching him with wide eyes.

"We need to jump," he said.

"No, we're going to fall. Hard," Merida corrected.

"I know it's crazy," he said, throwing up his hands. "But it's either that or a really big, really angry boar. Which do you think you'llâ€¦" He stopped short when she placed a finger on his lips. She was grinning up at him, fear and amusement in her smile.

"You talk too much, you daft Viking," Merida said. She rearranged her bow so it hung loosely around her back and stepped right onto the edge with him. "Let's do it."

"Really?" he asked, blinking. "You'llâ€¦ you trust me?"

Merida rolled her eyes. "It's not like I've much of a choice," the princess said. "If I die and you survive, I'll be haunting you for the rest of your life."

"Deal," Hiccup said. "Justâ€¦ take a deep breath, jump right from the edge, fall in feet first and keep your arms close to your side. Swim as fast as you can once you hit the water."

"Done this before, have you?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Merida raised a brow.

"There was a thing with a dragon and Gobber's underpants andâ€¦" Hiccup shut up when she slipped her fingers through his. They were just as cold and clammy as he felt, but her grin was fierce.

"I bet I can swim out of that water faster than you."

"Are you really going to turn this into a competition?"

"I can't show you up after we've been gored or drowned, can I?" Merida took a few steps back and readied herself. Hiccup watched her go, amazement and fear now running through him like a fever. "Well?" she asked, brow lifting imperiously.

"I am going to make you eat your words," Hiccup warned, taking his

place beside her. Behind them, the boar bellowed as it finally heaved itself up. Together, the two of them sprinted forward and jumped over the edge.

* * *

><p>"Where to next?"<p>

"Why are you asking me?" Hiccup asked, irritated. His clothes were soaking wet, he'd lost his pack in the water and he was pretty sure he'd lost a spring in his metal leg by the way it squeaked and groaned with every step. At least neither of them had lost any limbs or broken bones. The Viking brushed sodden locks away from his forehead and took stock of their surroundings. He didn't recognize the trees and the river around them, but then again he wasn't familiar with the woodlands around the castle of DunBroch at all.

Merida had laid her things aside to dryâ€"what little she retained during their swim. She'd kept her bow (no arrows) and her cloak. Hiccup had only his dagger.

If the princess was offended by his tone, she ignored it. Currently, the princess was wringing her dress dry and Hiccup was most definitely NOT staring at the way the fabric of her dress clung to her body. Nope, Hiccup was a smart lad and wasn't as crude as Snotlout say, or even Tuffnut. He was so busy NOT staring that he almost missed Merida's response.

"Because you weren't hunting for the boar, were you?"

Hiccup's eyes snapped to her face.

"It was a good act," Merida said calmly as if she hadn't just called out his deceit, "For a while, I thought you really _were _just an idiot following imaginary tracks in the forest." Merida gathered her hair to one side, baring a long, slender neck. A trickle of water dribbled from her dark, red curls and splashed down a bare shoulder.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," Hiccup said. Hiccup couldn't tell if his words came out thickly because he was unnerved, or angry or distracted or some dizzying combination of all three.

"You saw something last night," she continued, sky blue eyes peeking out at him while she combed her hair to some semblance of order. "All the time we were in the woods, you were just leading us in circles. I'm sorry about the boys. I should have known they'd follow me butâ€|" The princess shook her head and her hair rippled around her like a cloak. "Well, now's your chance. It'll take them a while to find us."

"Did you just take advantage of a boar attack to get us away from the young lords?" he asked, gawking. His voice was filled with equal parts astonishment, admiration and fear.

"Impressed?" Merida asked archly. "Now it's your turn. Go on then. Impress me."

* * *

><p>Author's Note: This is dedicated to pandolfo-malatesta who wanted to know what the extenuating circumstances were. Sorry for taking so long! Writing it out took way longer I thought it would and it's still not where I wanted it to be. I have a feeling it'll change once I get to this part on the full story. This takes place before all of the other drabbles I've written. Also, I happily ignored the physics of falling off a 25 meter high waterfall unscathed and with bow on your back. It's possible but I'm pretty sure it's more possible you'll break something. Or drown.

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* * *

><p>Old friends

* * *

><p>"Well, well, if it isn't the little red-haired lass I used to rescue off of rooftops," Kincaid said, laughing. Kincaid was one of her father's most trusted warriors. He grew up with Fergus and served in Fergus's father's war-band before the old Lord of DunBroch died. Through fire and sword, Kincaid remained one of Fergus's strongest supporters and a formidable commander in their wars against the Vikings. He often went out with a company of warriors to decide some dispute or handle small raids. Queen Elinor favored him because, unlike many of Fergus's warriors, he was a calm and patient man who preferred to wait and assess the situation rather than rushing into battle. He had only recently returned to the castle after settling the dispute with the Macquarrie clan.<p>

"Now it's my brothers you have to rescue off rooftops," Merida laughed after he set her down. Kincaid pulled out a chair and Merida sat down gratefully.

"No, no," Kincaid said, "You are the first and last DunBroch I'll help off rooftops. Your brothers are much smarter and know how to get themselves down from high places." He sat down beside her, easy and laughing. Merida hadn't realized how much she missed him.

"Too smart for their own good," Fergus rumbled from the throne. Merida's father looked imposing tonight. The king had not escaped Elinor's clutches, though he had certainly tried. Elinor had gifted

him with a brand new chainmail hauberk, the finest the smiths of the kingdom had ever crafted made from the hardest steel, and he wore the ceremonial leather armor of the DunBroch lords over it. The fur cape he wore belonged to his grandfather who, legend had it, wrestled with a bear barehanded and won. It gleamed rich and dark in the firelight. But for all that he looked every inch the king tonight, Fergus was and always would be a father to Merida first. Fergus winked at Merida before draining his goblet. "For the life of me, I couldn't understand how you got to the roof without knowing how to climb down. You gave your mother such a fright and scared years off my life."

Merida shook her head, grinning. "I don't remember much of it," she confessed.

"Well, I do," said Kincaid, slamming his flagon down the table so hard ale spilled out. "You were crying tears enough to fill the lake becauseâ€| who was it, milord?" Kincaid paused in his retelling to bite an apple and spit the seeds out. "Some young lad, her playmate was going awayâ€| Aye, it was milady Queen's friendâ€| Valhallarama's boy!" Kincaid snapped his fingers and tossed the apple away. "Barf? Burp? Some funny name, I don't recall. You were told that the young lad wasn't coming back and you swore you wouldn't come down until he did."

"I'd never!" Merida snapped, blushing hotly. "I don't even know who Valhallarama is."

"You don't?" asked Kincaid, shooting her an odd look. "Valhallarama used to visit your mum all the time when you were young. You'd run off and get into all sorts of trouble with her son. I thoughtâ€|"

"Leave her alone," Fergus said. Merida felt a fierce gratitude to her father. "Now she's got three fine young lads vying for her hand." The gratitude died a quick death. Merida glared at her father who only laughed.

"Phew," Kincaid said, standing up and taking his flagon with him. "I forgot how terrifying your glares are, Princess. I'll take my ale to someone who'll appreciate our wit." He winked at Merida, bowed to Fergus and walked away.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Ever had that uncomfortable experience when your distant aunts or uncles shove their kid at you and say, "You used to play with him/her, don't you remember?" And you're just like, "Noâ€| no, I really don't." "Oh, but you guys were so cute together!" "Yep, thatâ€| that doesn't really help with the remembering."

This drabble is actually part of chapter one, so chronologically, it happens before the other drabbles. No direct interaction yet, but believe I am so dying to get there.

Let me know what you think! I welcome reviews and constructive criticism.

If you're interested in more, I have a tumblr account that I'll

probably be posting more drabbles/head canons first. My username is nessalk.

6. Lightning and Death

Disclaimer: I don't own Hiccup or Merida, obviously. I'm not making any money off this. Both characters and the movies they come from belong to Dreamworks and Disney, respectively. If you really want to see something to blow you away, go watch the movies. Then think about these two interacting. Then you'll see what I mean.

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><p>Lightning and Death

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><p>Sima found the princess at last on the rooftop of the highest tower in the castle of DunBroch just as Kincaid predicted. It was twilight but the sky looked much darker. In the distance, ominous clouds drifted against the umber sky with all the terrible slowness of sinking ships. The wind bit through Sima's simple servant's shift and chilled her bones. There was barely any light to see the top of the towerâ€”only a waning moon that would soon be swallowed up by the coming storm. If Sima hadn't been paying attention, it would have been easy to miss Merida amongst the crenellations of the tower.<p>

But Kincaid's words had proven wise and the servant caught her breath at the sight of her mistress. Merida reclined amongst the crenellations, hair and skirt stirring in the wind like a bird readying for flight while her fingers toyed with a pendant around her neck. Sima felt a moment's panic. Her first instinct was to warn her mistress; it would only be too easy for the princess to fall to her death. But Sima already knew the answer Merida would giveâ€”a laugh and a shrug. If Sima persisted, Merida would tease Sima. "Worry much more and you'll turn into Maudie," Merida warned once, her laughter and smiles easing the caution in her words.

"Here you are, milady," Sima said, her words coming out in pants. She tossed her sweat-stained brown hair away from her forehead. She was hot from trekking all through the castle looking for her wayward mistress, but knew that the storm would soon steal away what warmth she had. "I've been looking everywhere for you." Sima tried, but it was hard to hide the rebuke in her words. Merida was supposed to be resting from her recent trip "visiting all the clans." Elinor had given Sima strict instructions to keep the princess indoors and away from all exertions. Sima supposed this was a victory. Technically, the princess was sitting in the castle.

Merida shrugged one shoulder and Sima knew it was as much of an apology as she was going to get for the night.

Sima never dreamed that princesses could be like Merida. As the child of a free landholder and later the slave to Clan MacGuffin, Sima often dreamed that princesses were delicate, lovely creatures with sweet smiles and demure glances. Merida was lovely, to be sure, especially when she wasn't trying. Over the past year, Sima had witnessed the Queen dress her daughter in fine gowns and dance in

parties, but Sima thought Merida was prettiest when she wore her own gown and didn't care for the state of her hair or her face. Like now for instance. The moonlight turned Merida's skin ivory pale and her fiery hair darkened to the dusty bloom of a rose. Her brows weren't contracted in anger or concentration; they were smooth in repose. The intense energy Merida exuded had dimmed from the scorching heat of the sun into something like the warmth of candles at night.

It troubled Sima more than she thought it would.

Merida wasn't a delicate, demure princess. She was forthright, willful and stubborn as an ox if she set her mind to it. She spoke her mind and her heart with little regard to rank or propriety. "I don't care if she's a slave," Merida snapped heatedly to Niall Dingwall's mother once. "Sima's my friend and she can be my lady-in-waiting if I say so." Upset, joyful, worried, excited—Merida radiated emotion and drew people in whether she meant to or not. So when Merida fell silent, that was when Sima knew something was truly wrong.

The brown-haired servant twisted her fingers together, a nervous habit that she'd inherited from her mother, before squaring her shoulders and walking as close as she dared (though never too close). "Storm's coming," Sima said.

The princess nodded, still stroking the pendant in her fingers.

Sima realized with a start that it was the pendant the Viking boy had given her—the one with the kind eyes and smile. Sima felt foolish for not recognizing it sooner. It had caused such a furor when the Viking boy, Hiccup, had presented it to the princess as a gift during her last birthday.

* * *

><p>"Merida, uh, I mean, Princess Merida," Hiccup said, stumbling over his words. He was the center of attention of the whole court and Sima felt badly for the boy. Sima liked the attention as little as he did. Color rose in his cheeks, but he did not pay attention to the disdainful glances of the ladies or the cold stares of the warriors and lords. He kept his gaze on the princess who watched him with all the solemnity and formality the occasion required but for the small, secret curling of her lips. "I know—I don't have any treasure to give you. If I did, it couldn't compare to what you already have." The Viking youth looked down once then offered a small bundle to the princess. She took it, but her light blue eyes were trained intensely on him. "Even so—" he drew a deep breath and straightened up, "I made this with the help of a friend."<p>

Merida unwrapped the bundle and lifted up a rough pendant. It was a curious stone—dark but glossy. The present looked entirely unremarkable but for the etchings on either side. On the one side was a bow and arrow and the other was that of a dragon with a broken tail. Sima didn't recognize the design but apparently Merida did. The princess gasped, her eyes snapping to Hiccup's face.

"To help you remember the story of the boy and the dragon," Hiccup said, such a gentle look in his gaze, "and to remind you — of who you are."

To Sima's shock, tears filled the princess's eyes. In one smooth motion, Merida jumped down from the small dais and threw her arms around the Viking. Hiccup was as much surprised as the rest of the court. He staggered under the surprise weight, but his arms around her were just as firm and fierce. Unheeding of the gasps and Queen Elinor's, "Merida!" the two clutched each other, murmuring and laughing in tones far too low for the others to hear. When the two finally broke apart, the princess was smiling as brilliantly as the sun. She apologized to the court and to her mother for the delay, as polite and delicate as you please, then turned around and asked Hiccup to fasten the necklace around her. The princess even gathered her rich red curls to one side as he did so, smiling at him over her shoulder.

* * *

><p>Sima remembered the storm of words exchanged between mother and daughter that night, finally escalating in Elinor's command, "Throw that pendant out!" Sima should have known Merida wouldn't have given it up. "Was it worth it, then?" Sima asked, twisting her fingers. As warm and friendly as Merida always had been, Sima tried hard to remember her place. The last time she'd let herself love a highborn, allowed herself to think of herself as not a mere slave, she'd been given away as a gift to strangers. But this one, just this one time, for Meridaâ€| Sima recognized the hidden hurt lingering in behind the princess's eyes. "To visit him in his homeâ€| one last time?"<p>

Merida's lips curled into a fierce grin. Her eyes danced in the gloom of the night and Sima knew she was remembering past adventures with the Viking boyâ€| adventures she'd only told Sima in brief descriptions and snippets. She'd jealously hoarded her stories close to her chest, though Merida always confided in Sima in times past. That was the first and only time Sima ever felt resentment to the Viking boy.

"The Queen says you will marry one of the young lords," Sima said then hated herself for the sudden tension in Merida's body. It was justâ€| Merida seemed so far away sometimes. Sometimes, she seemed more fey spirit than princess, more feral hunting cat than girl. Sima realized with a stab of irony that when Merida got in one of her wild moods, it had been Hiccup the household had relied on to sway Merida when Merida's mother was gone on state visits.

"So what?" Merida said, interrupting Sima's thoughts. Her fingers tightened on the pendant. It was the first time Merida ever admitted that marriage to one of her suitors was less a possibility and more an eventuality. Sima knew it cost Merida to say the words.

"You can't just sit here waiting for him," Sima said. She put a hand on Merida's shoulder. Even through the cloth, Merida felt cold to the touch. Who knew how long Merida had been sitting out there. "You don't know even know that he's coming."

The princess shook off Sima's touch and stood up. Sima's breath caught in her throat as Merida stood tall amongst the crenellations. Merida ignored the height and the wind and the incoming storm. "I wait for no one," Merida said, something of Queen Elinor in her tone. "I know what my choices are; I know what my choice must be."

"What are you doing then?" Sima asked, despair in her voice. "If you're not waiting for him and if you're promised to another, what are you doing here?"

Merida was quiet for so long that Sima thought she ignored her. Then Merida cocked her head to the side and said, "D'you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Sima asked. She could only hear the rumble of the coming storm and the wind. Lightning flashed and Sima cowered. Drops of rain spattered the battlements. Merida tilted her face up to the sky.

"That soundâ€¦ the wind whistling followed by the crack of thunder and the shaking of the earth."

"Yes," Sima whispered. "Lightning and death. That's what my father used to call it."

The wind howled again and nearly snatched away the princess's words. Joy and pain lined every syllable and seemed to make the words crack as she whispered, "I'm being close to him."

"Milady?" Sima asked, confused and frightened.

When Merida looked at Sima, her face was wet with rain or tears, Sima could not tell. "I'm not waiting, Sima. I'm saying goodbye."

* * *

><p>Author's Note: So, whoa. This turned out way sadder than I intended it to be. I apologize for the long hiatus! Things had been really rough for the past few weeks (months), but things are getting better. On the upside, I am really hitting my stride with the entire work as a whole :) Things should be going a lot faster now and hopefully I'll post the first chapter soon.

7. Dragonfire

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><p>Dragonfire

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><p>"Wait," Hiccup said, angling his head back to her. "Is this... is this dangerous?" His thoughts circled back to his theory of the redhead being a robber. She wouldn't be using him to sneak into the castle to steal something, would she?<p>

He couldn't make out her light blue eyes since she'd pulled her hood so low, but he could make out the smile that sparked like dragonfire on her lips, "Oh, I hope so."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: This is an excerpt from the chapter where Hiccup meets a certain princess. Can you guess what they're up to?

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed the previous drabbles! Your words of encouragement really help buoy me up and get the writing done faster.

8. Making Friends

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><p>Making Friends

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><p>"Just think, the Red Death went through all that trouble when all it had to do was put you on top of a horse," she smirked as she caught Hiccup's horse and brought it back to him with arrogant ease. Her light blue eyes surveyed Hiccup up and down as the Viking mounted with some difficulty. "You're not much of a rider, are you?"<p>

Oh, you're on, Hiccup thought, disgruntled. _You and your Thor-blasted horses versus me and Toothless in any race you can think of._

Something of his thoughts must have shown in his expression. The red-haired Highlander cocked her head to the side, playful intrigue giving her face an elfish cast as she gazed at him steadily, almost expectantly.

"We don't have a lot of horses in Berk. The terrain isn't good for them," Hiccup said, turning his head away. _Think about the tribe,_ Hiccup reminded himself. _We need this trade to work. _"If you're not going to murder me," Hiccup said, clearing his throat, "and we're not going to town, then where are we going?" Even though he'd been distracted by Blueberry's antics, there was no way the path they'd taken to get to the castle was this difficult. He didn't think the bridge would have carried the weight of all the Vikings plus their horses.

He thought he heard her sigh, but he couldn't be sure. "I thought you might appreciate a closer look at the countryside."

"Oh, pretty," Hiccup agreed with some asperity as the horses started off once more. "I just love trees and steep, narrow mountain trails."

"You're a picky hero," the princess observed. "How ever did you manage to kill the Red Death while you were _complaining_ to it about

the roads?"

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: Oh dear. Hiccup and Merida are just being absolutely catty to each other. In fairness to Hiccup, Merida's making it very hard to be nice to her.

The next section of my fanfic has been giving me boatloads of trouble. I know what needs to happen but it is just not flowing for the life of me. Sorry for the non-updates! Life's been super busy lately and it doesn't help this section is giving me trouble.

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed the previous drabbles! Your words of encouragement really help buoy me up and get the writing done faster. If you'd like to see more of my drabbles (or my complaints re: the writing process for this story), please head on over to my tumblr. My username is nessalk.

9. Beyond the Clouds

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****Disclaimer****: I don't own Hiccup or Merida, obviously. I'm not making any money off this. Both characters and the movies they come from belong to Dreamworks and Disney, respectively. If you really want to see something to blow you away, go watch the movies. Then think about these two interacting. Then you'll see what I mean. Title of this snippet is from the HTTYD 2 teaser trailer music.

* * *

><p>Beyond the Clouds

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><p>Merida was flummoxed. Though the dragon saddle was similar enough to a horse's saddle, Toothless wore nothing like Angus's bridle. There was nothing in front of her save for a broad pommel from which Hiccup attached the leather harness he made her wear.<p>

The Viking, seated behind her, ran a hand once more from pommel, to strap to her harness and back again to make sure it was secure. Hiccup hadn't wanted to sit behind her but while cajoling and bribing hadn't worked, her innocent suggestion that she might accidentally slip had.

"Oi, stop worrying," she said, elbowing him in the side. "You've trapped me better than rabbits in a hutch. Now, show me how you tell Toothless to go."

Hiccup grunted and she could almost feel him roll his eyes from behind her. "I wish," he muttered underneath his breath. In a louder voice, he continued, "I just ask him to go. The rest is just kind of instinct."

"What?" Merida asked but was abruptly slammed against him as the dragon took one great leap off the cliff. One moment they were diving head first into the blue, blue waters of Berk below. The next moment,

Toothless's wings had snapped open and they were soaring upwards. Fingers clutching the broad pommel, Merida fought against gravity as Toothless streaked towards the clouds with powerful strokes of its great wings.

The princess shrieked in delight. They were fast, so fast that the wind scratched against her face and stung her eyes, but she didn't care. She let out a loud whoop of excitement as they accelerated, spun upside down, dove and looped.

After minutes of dizzying flight, Toothless leveled off and coasted across the sky as smoothly as if they were sailing a mirror-smooth lake. Below her, Berk stretched out like a storybook island. She turned in her seat and leaned so far out that Hiccup warned her to be careful. She only laughed at that, and he grumbled and tightened his arms around her.

"Let off, would you?" she demanded, eyes still focused on the vista stretched out below her. "You've caught me already."

"Close your mouth," Hiccup commanded, voice sounding strangely muffled.

"Why?" Merida asked. Hiccup didn't respond. She parted her lips but they were abruptly among the clouds and Merida got a mouthful of moisture slamming against the back of her throat.

By the time she stopped wheezing, they had cleared the lower layer and were floating beside hills and mountains of clouds. She felt Hiccup shaking behind her and she realized he laughing.

"Youâ€"!" she snarled, turning so quickly Hiccup didn't have a chance to jerk his head back. In one abrupt motion, they were so close their lips would have touchedâ€" if not for the helmet that covered his face.

The Viking froze, green eyes wide and surprised in the slits of his dragon leather helm. He must have slipped it on right before they through the clouds. His arms around her slackened but for once, she didn't wriggle or lean forward or to the side, almost pitching out of the saddle. He'd told her often enough in the past fifteen minutes to _just sit still_, _would you_ but how could she?

It was breathtaking. Dragon flight was more than she'd dared dream, more than she'd wished for in the passing golden afternoons when he told her the story of the boy and the dragon with one tailfin. The Night Fury was elegance and power combined and when it took flight with its riderâ€" it was freedom itself. She'd never wanted anything more.

Except maybe this.

She kissed him, soft as rain, brief as lightning and deep as thunder. It touched him, passed through him, and she felt him shudder against her back, could feel the earthquake pass from him to her and back again, until she felt like they were falling, diving back again through the clouds.

She felt his lips move underneath the helmet and she pulled away, just enough so that a hairsbreadth of space separated them. "Thank

you," she whispered.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: This was really fun to write and not at all how I expected it to turn out. Thank you, freak4zelda, for giving me the prompt! Hope you enjoy it as much I did writing it. This will most likely be included in my fanfic but slightly modified. I think Merida and Hiccup had a rather big argument right before her first dragon flight so the mood might be a bit different.

On the upside, I finished Chapter 2 of the fanfic! Huzzah! I know that sounds lame, but considering that Ch. 2 is about 73 pages give or take, it's total progress for me, haha. Ch. 3 outline is rolling right out. Please feel free to give me any prompts. I need the creative juices flowing for more mericcup fluff to come.

If you want to see more, please check out my tumblr account (username nessalk). I usually post bits and pieces there before I brush it up and put it here.

10. Portrait

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><p>Portrait

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><p>Synnove liked to listen to him talk of Berk. The way he spoke made his home seem whimsical and charming like memories of a childhood before Dagur was poisoned by his madness or their mother her ambition. She liked listening to him talk of inhabitants who were stubborn and contrary; who resorted to trickery and bullying, but never outright murder to settle disputes; and who seemed to have an unholy fascination with fire (why did everyone on Berk carry firestarters?). She liked hearing about his father, a stern but just, fair and warm presence, looking out for him and everybody in the village. She remembered the last time she felt that from Osvald and the memory made her sad. Mostly, Synnove liked listening to him talk about his friendsâ€"crazy, almost always in need of rescuing from themselves or other people, but the best and truest friends any Viking could want.

"But worse than the twins are these triplet brothers my friend has," Hiccup's grin belied his amusement rather than any irritation. "They're really young and impossible to look out for. I don't know how she managed without me. One time we were at a lakeâ€" "

"What's she like?"

"What?"

"The girl with the triplet brothers. You mentioned her before but you never really told me about her. I think you've mentioned her mother, father and brothers but never her."

Hiccup blushed. Curiosity and a twist of jealousy made Synnove stop and turn towards him. The Hooligan heir bit his lip. He'd been careful not to mention names, but she had heardâ€"everyone had heardâ€"of the beautiful, fierce warrior from Berk who was his childhood friend and closest companion.

"You don't have to talk about her if you like. You've painted such a vivid portrait of your friendsâ€"your cousin, the twins, the bookworm, and your best friend. You've even talked about your pet sheep! I was just curious. You seemed close."

"Close!" Hiccup bit out and it sounded half exasperated and half afraid. "We're not close. Not really."

Synnove shrugged and they resumed walking. The jagged uneven path her warriors had cut through the overgrown field criss-crossed and looped back. If she hadn't seen the path from her father's longhouse, she would have thought they were going in circles. The tall wheat stalks grew even over Hiccup's head. She broke a stalk in her fingers. Though plants in Pandemonium were tough and made to endure the elements, this felt dry and brittle, starved for sun and water.

"To the people she cares about, she's warm and fiercely protective."

Hiccup's hesitation cautioned Synnove to treat the subject with utmost caution. "She sounds nice."

"But to everyone else, she's a bratâ€"impatient, impulsive, and impossible to please," Hiccup scoffed.

The description so jarred with the growing reputation of a fiercesome Valkyrie that Synnove nearly laughed.

"Don't get me wrong. She can be compelling if she puts her mind to it. When she wants something, she's...electrifying. Larger than life. She's the biggest short person I know."

"She sounds terrifying."

"She is. But mostly, she's willful and wild and as unpredictable as the sea."

"You say that like it's a good thing."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: This is from the point of view of Synnove, a rather important Berserker who will play a major role later on. No Hiccup and Merida interaction, but â€| If you like these snippets, please check out CROSSING THE HORIZON. It's the larger, complete story from which these snippets take place.

Thank you to everyone who reviewed/followed/favorited the series! Your feedback really keeps me going. Please feel free to send prompts. I always enjoy getting inspirations and ideas for the next

mericcup fluff. I also have an account in tumblr (nessalk) that you can follow. I usually post head canons and rough ideas/drafts before I put it up on ffnet or ao3.

11. Dragonsblood

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><p>Dragonsblood

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><p>"She's got dragonsblood, El," laughed Valhallarama as they were walking through the rowan forest near the castle. Ahead, a tiny Merida planted her feet atop a log and stabbed at the gloom with a white wooden sword. The image was ruined somewhat by an even smaller Hiccup trying and failing to climb the same log.<p>

"Dragonsblood just means stubbornness." Elinor scowled and nearly tripped over a branch on the ground. Val steadied her without even looking.

"Wonder where she got that from."

Hiccup tugged on Merida's skirt until the princess whirled around. He lifted up his arms, chubby fists opening and closing in the universal gesture for _up_. Merida scowled. She tossed her sword to the side, took his hands and began pulling him up.

"Merida, be careful with him!" Sure enough, the girl overcompensated and both disappeared over the log. There was a shriek from Merida, an oomph from Hiccup, quiet, then simultaneous giggles. "It's entirely on Fergus's side of the family!"

"Of course," Val smirked. She paused at a sound Elinor couldn't hear, brows wrinkled in confusion.

"What is it?" Elinor adjusted her crown back in place. If she had been with anyone else, she might have been worried. But she trusted Valhallarama and her instincts above all except her husband's. If the Viking heroine's hand hadn't drifted to the famous white sword hanging at her hip, Elinor knew they weren't in any danger.

"Nothing," Valhallarama shook her head. She offered Elinor a small clip from her pocket. Elinor used it to anchor her crown in place. "Maybe it's the will o'the wisps Merida and Hiccup are hunting."

Behind the log, Hiccup's face was screwed in concentration as he picked out twigs and leaves from her Merida's unruly locks. Elinor might have appreciated it if his hands weren't covered in dirt.

"Merida, dear, your hairâ€œ"

"No! No comb!" Merida jerked away from Elinor's reaching hand. The girl ran off, nearly dragging Hiccup behind her. Elinor watched them go, hands on her hips.

Valhallarama hid a smile, "Look, El, you can't make your daughter do anything."

"You do. She listens to you. This hunting expedition was your idea."

"I gave her choices. I told her she could play now with Hiccup and have her hair combed later or she could have her hair combed now and play later. One or the other. But she must do both. She agreed."

"She's letting Hiccup comb her hair now."

"To be fair, she probably thought more of her hair would survive with Hiccup than with you."

Elinor tossed a twig at Valhallarama. Valhallarama laughed. It was the last visit she ever paid the Highlands.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: I admit, Valhallarama and Elinor's friendship is one of my favorite elements in this story. I have tons of headcanons of their adventures, the letters they exchanged talking about their husbands, their homeland and their children, and their general badassery. I hope this little snippet gives a taste of their relationship and of the relationship between young Hiccup and young Merida.

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed the previous drabbles! Your words of encouragement really help buoy me up and get the writing done faster.

12. SeiÃ°r

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><p>SeiÃ°r_

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><p>The princess was the last person Hiccup expected standing outside his door. She grinned up at him, hair heavy with damp and darkened to a dusty rose. The mahogany brown of her dress brought out the ruddy red in her cheeks and the sunlight in her skin. There was a bowl with a pale yellow ointment in her hands.<p>

"Are you alone?"

"Um, yes. Why?" He squinted at her suspiciously. Though they'd come to an understanding in Queen's Tooth, he hadn't appreciated the way she'd laughed at him when he fell off ten minutes later. The cuts in his hand still stung and burned.

Merida came in, the sheer force of her presence enough to make Hiccup back away before any physical contact could be made. "Oh good. You're already clean. Sit down."

"Hey! You can't just walk into men's rooms and boss them around." Hiccup whipped around and tried to spot any extra pieces of underwear or clothing lying about. The Queen had installed the Viking party in their own dormitory. The beds lying in neat, precise rows around him were unmade. Pieces of armor were strewn across the room.

If Merida noticed the disarray, she gave no sign. She faced him, hip cocked and a smirk on her lips. "Actually, I'm the princess. I can do just that if I like."

"But it's my bedroom!"

"You're very observant." She dragged a small stool over to the one neatly made bed but for the open sketchbook. "Is that a view of DunBroch from the lake? That's not half bad!"

Hiccup snapped the book shut and sat on top of it for good measure. "What do you want?"

"I'll tell you if you roll up your sleeves and puts your hands on your knees palm up."

He scowled at her. She smiled back at him.

"No one's ever said no to you before, have they?"

"I could wrestle your sleeves off one at a time." Her blue eyes swept over him up and down. She put a finger on her lower lip, head tilted to the side. "You're taller than me, but I'm quicker and I've wrestled with the wee devils all my life."

"You wouldn't," Hiccup frowned. She probably was quicker than him and wrestling with her siblings gave her some experience, but she wouldn't actuallyâ€

"Bet I can have you on your back in 30 seconds." Merida rose, putting aside her bowl.

"All right!" Hiccup yelped. With that mental image burned in his mind, Hiccup hastily began rolling his sleeve up. Apart from the squeaking of the stool as Merida sat back down, the room was in complete silence. Hiccup coughed and held out his right hand. "Happy?"

"Very." She set the bowl down in her lap and gently cupped his hand. Her fingers ghosted over his cuts and scrapes.

Hiccup twitched. It was first time she had ever touched him, he realized, though not the first time she had been so close. Her touch was surprisingly delicate as she turned his hand this way and that,

frowning.

"It's worse than I thought." She peered so closely into his hand he felt her breath like the barest breeze tickling against his palm. "I should have come sooner. I'll have to make a proper job of it now."

"What's worse? What job?"

"Your hand." Merida straightened up and set his hand against her knees. She kneaded his wrist gently and with her other hand began rubbing the ointment into his palm.

That was almost worse than Merida wrestling with him. He pulled his hand away but the grip around his wrist became steel. Face flaming, Hiccup blurted, "I'm not hurt. This is unnecessary."

"You've got scrapes and cut from when you fell off the Queen's Tooth."

"I've had worse. _Trust _me." He thumped his prosthetic leg for good measure.

"Not from the Queen's Tooth. There's a," she frowned, then, to his surprise, used a _Viking _word, "_seiÃ°r_ about that place."

His hand stilled in her own. "Where'd you learn that?"

"Humor me," she shrugged.

"Princess."

"Don't be daft," she snorted and shrugged her hair to the side. "You know my name."

"Butâ€" "

"Do you like being called Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the III, son and heir of Stoick the Vast, dragon conqueror of Berk?"

He stared at her. Ok, she had a point. But his title was a lie. Mostly.

"Och, don't tell me you're one of those uppity types who makes their friends call them by _Lord Freckleface Grumpkin great rescuer of sheep and slayer of pumpkins."_ Her voice deepened to a precise, booming tone. It was an uncanny imitation of someone, Hiccup could tell.

"Merida," he smiled.

"_How dare you address me by my perfectly functional name, you presumptuous peer, instead of my ridiculously long title some bard was forced to make up while he was soused and bored to death and couldn't find anything that rhymed with pumpkins!_"_

"Merida!" he laughed.

"Doesn't that sound better?" she grinned. "Now let me get on with it before someone catches me."

"Where are you supposed to be now?"

"Spending time with Lady Helen of the perfect face and the perfect hair and the perfect smile and the perfect manners." Her voice was distracted as her fingers continued their ministrations. "It's high treason to have the princess dress herself you know."

"Naturally. I have six attendants at home not just one." Without thinking about it, Hiccup relaxed at her touch. She was very gentle and, despite his words, the cuts had burned. The ointment helped take away the pain. "What is that ointment made from?"

"Honey and Greamh mac feidh."

"Grim what?"

"It's a fern. Very difficult to find or grow, but good for burns. You have to prepare it right so that you can mix it with the honey." She held up his hand and blew on his palm gently.

The ointment, which had been soothing before, became cool to the touch. She held up his hand close to her lips and blew on the ointment twice more. The burning and stinging sensation on his right hand slowly receded leaving him hyper-aware of her closeness. Did she have no sense of space with everyone or just him? She was always coming just shy of too close. Her fingers pat then spread the ointment carefully on the scrapes and burns. Her other hand massaged the stiffness away from his muscles. He was uncomfortably aware of her gentle breathing, the frown on her face and the tickle of her hair on his arm as she bent over her work.

Suddenly, Merida looked up at him. They froze. She blinked and gave him a shy smile, returning to her work.

Alarm bells started ringing in Hiccup's head. Breath quick, he tried to think of something to say. "You weren't this concerned about me when I fell off the Queen's Tooth. In fact, you were laughing your head off."

"You didn't fall off. You slid down the last five feet," she smirked. "Yelping like a wounded hart as you went."

"There you go again, willfully misinterpreting me. For your information, Merida, that was a manful Viking warcry of landing."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I hadn't realized Viking warcries were so... high pitched," she laughed. But the laughter wasn't derisive. It was just gleeful. Hiccup begrudgingly forgave her for laughing at him.

Merida switched to his left hand. Hiccup flexed his right hand experimentally. No pain or stiffness. Highland medicine was good. He turned his attention back to her, curious with the process.

His left hand was stiffer and more badly scraped since it was his dominant hand. She was careful with the cuts and took the time to pull out the knots in his hand. This time, he was ready for the cooling sensation from the ointment when she blew on it. The sensations were pleasant and oddly... sensual.

"How'd you get that scar?"

"That was when I was Gobber's, the blacksmith's, new apprentice." Hiccup flexed right hand flexed again but mostly he was paying attention to the girl in front of him. "I wasn't paying attention and the iron slipped... I have a lot of scars like that."

"From daydreaming?"

"Gobber might have thought I was a little slow." Hiccup shrugged and cursed himself internally. _Smooth, Haddock, just keep making yourself sound like an idiot__._

"Could you hold up your hand?"

"Is that a request?" He smirked at her as he held up his hand. She made a face at him and laughed. She held her hand up to his, palms almost touching. Her hand was smaller than his, daintier.

"The dragon that gave you that bite must have been enormous. The teeth marks cover most of my palm and fingers." She pulled down her palm and tugged his hand back in place.

"Most dragons are really big. Most Viking tools are really big."

"Bigger than Highland tools, I'm sure."

"What? I don't know." He peered at her suspiciously. Her tone held the same asperity it had the first time she found out he was the "dragon conqueror of Berk." "I hadn't thought about it. Some of them. Maybe."

She grinned at him and he relaxed back into his slump. She pulled up her left sleeve. "See that little area that's a slightly different color from the rest? That's where the bow string kept taking the skin off 'till I learned proper form."

"It must have taken you a while to learn, to form a scar like that." Hiccup traced the scar below her wrist with his eyes.

"Ages. I was the slowest learner my teacher's ever had, he says. Of course, I'm the only pupil my teacher's ever had."

They smiled at each other over this shared trait. Merida patted his hand and he pulled it back.

"So," he asked, flexing his left hand. Like the right, the pain had become nonexistent. "You make a habit of going to cursed places?"

"I make a habit of going to challenging places," she smirked. "Haven't you ever looked at some impossible place and wonderedâ€"what if?"

"The sky," Hiccup said almost instantly. "Everyday."

It was Merida's turn to stare. Hiccup blushed. He shouldn't have said that. It slipped out without him realizing. It was nice being with Merida. It had been so long since he had a proper conversation with

someone he genuinely liked. It was almost like being with his friends back in Berk.

The bells rang for dinner.

"That's my cue." Merida gathered her things. She stood up and went to the door.

"Merida," Hiccup bit his lip. She paused at the open the door. "Thank you. For, um, the ointment but especially the Queen's Tooth. That was..."

"I know," she grinned, then hesitated. With a little blush, she swept him a curtsy. "Ah, thank you for the story. I... prefer it over all the other Viking tales."

His heart gave a little thump at that. The words burst out of his mouth before he could stop himself, before he could even consider whether it was a good idea. "Would you do it?"

"What?"

"Would you ride... I mean, if you could, would you ride a dragon?"

"Anything can happen."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes: I always thought Merida and Hiccup's friendship would be rocky from start to finish. How they compare and contrast to one another, the similarities and differences, and how it pays off in dividends from a dramatic standpoint is my favorite part of their relationship. This snippet takes place right after Merida and Hiccup's first adventure. Let me know what you think!

As for Crossing the Horizon, Merida and Hiccup will be meeting in the next chapter :)

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed the previous drabbles! Your words of encouragement really help buoy me up and get the writing done faster.

13. Make Me

Disclaimer: I don't own Hiccup or Merida, obviously. I'm not making any money off this. Both characters and the movies they come from belong to Dreamworks and Disney, respectively. If you really want to see something to blow you away, go watch the movies. Then think about these two interacting. Then you'll see what I mean.

* * *

><p>LIMINALITY

**Make Me
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><p>Hiccup emerged, spluttering from the water, and it was all Merida could do to keep from bursting into laughter. Balancing herself on one slender tree branch, she called over her shoulder. "Are you okay?"<p>

"I am never trusting your judgment ever again!" It was the thirty-seventh time he'd ever said it and the third time he'd said it today. Merida didn't mind it coming from him as she minded it coming from her mother or even the young lords. Maybe it was because all Merida had to do was say, "Let me prove it to you" and he'd listen. Hiccup always listened.

"I swear I thought the branch could take your weight." Laughter welled up and nearly loosened her grip on the rough bark. Biting her lip, she concentrated on finding the next branch down, and not on the Viking flailing like Hamish, Hubert or Harris in his bathtub.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"No!" As soon as she said it, a giggle escaped her lips and Merida lost her grip on the tree trunk. At the same time, her foot slipped and suddenly, she was crashing the last few feet downwards. She hit the ground with a painful _whump_.

"Are you okay?" Merida heard a splash of water and sodden footsteps on moss. She curled to her side and buried her face in her arms. "Oh Thor, did you break something?"

Merida shook her head. Hiccup's breath came in anxious gasps as he peered anxiously over her. His hand ghosted over her arms, shoulder, down her side and to her legs, searching for wounds.

"Did you sprain something?"

Merida shook her head again.

"Merida, talk to me! Are you in pain?" His voice changed from concern to outrage. "Are youâ€"are you laughing at me?!"

He grabbed the arm covering her face and rolled her onto her back. Her laughter sprang free and clear in the warm air. "You should have seen your face when you fell!"

"I can't believe I ran over here because I was worried about you!" Hiccup shot up to his feet and glowered at her. His shirt stuck skin-tight against him; water trickled down his cheek and fell on his chest. With his upturned mouth and vivid green eyes glaring at her from behind his sodden hair, he reminded her so much of Hubert's pet that she couldn't help the chortles spilling out from her mouth.

"You look like Hubert's kitten when we get it in the bath!" she gasped, clutching her stomach.

"You said that branch could hold me!"

"It's not my fault you had too much of the roast venison!"

"Stop laughing!"

"Come over here and make me!"

The Viking loomed over her, green eyes sneaky and speculative. Merida realised that she should have shut up right away. Her mum said she had crazy ideas; Hiccup was in another class altogether when he had that expression on his face.

Hiccup grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled upwards.

"What are youâ€"why are youâ€" Merida's words cut off, followed firstly by her laughter then her breath. Sitting up, her eyes took in the narrowness of Hiccup's waist and hips emphasized by the black markings slashing at his side. Somewhere in the back of her shock-addled mind, Merida realized that Hiccup had tattoos. His flat stomach flexed with his breathing and Merida traced the faint trail of hair that led from his belly button and disappeared into his trousers. Then her eyes traveled up to a broad, well-defined chest and long arms corded with muscle. No wonder the branch had broken under his weight. He was all lean muscle underneath his oversized shirts and vest.

At that moment, Hiccup's wet shirt hit her face. Merida shrieked. Long hands grabbed her by the hips and swung her over a shoulder. She pulled his shirt away and slapped his bare back. Hiccup's legs covered the distance between the tree and pool in five long strides.

"Put me down!" Merida squirmed and tried to push herself off. Hiccup's grip firmed against the backs of her thighs. Panting, she stilled and tried very hard not to focus on the patterns and shapes covering the entirety of his back.

His voice rumbled, dark and amused, against her belly, "Make me."

* * *

><p>Author's Note:

This is dedicated to lucid-ultramarine who wanted a drabble based on the prompt "Come Over Here and Make me". Initially, I was writing modern!mericcup but it got away from me and ended up being part of CROSSING THE HORIZON, haha. I always thought Merida would notice Hiccup multiple times, but kind of be distracted by other things going on. This would be one of the times she noticed, but didn't get distracted right away.

This was first posted on tumblr and archive of our own under the username nessalk. Drop by and say hi!

Thank you to everyone who read/reviewed/favorited/followed the story! EXTRA SPECIAL THANK YOU to my new beta nothingnothingtralala. This chapter is particularly shiny and grammatically error-free because of her :)

14. Touch

Disclaimer: I don't own Hiccup or Merida, obviously. I'm not making

any money off this. Both characters and the movies they come from belong to Dreamworks and Disney, respectively. If you really want to see something to blow you away, go watch the movies. Then think about these two interacting. Then you'll see what I mean.

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><p>LIMINALITY

**Touch
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><p>In retrospect, diving from the enemy's dragon and into the icy waters of the Barbaric Archipelago probably didn't improve her chances of survival. Still, Merida much preferred to die by hypothermia rather than being tortured, held for ransom, then killed. If anything, she wouldn't need to smell her kidnappers for much longer.<p>

The cold was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, though she'd grown up swimming in the largest loch in the Highlands. It was as if an icy fist had smashed up and enveloped her. She could hardly breathe, let alone tread the water. She kept kicking her arms and legs out, gasping, and her eyes desperately searched the sky and surrounding coastlines.

Thick, suffocating fog surrounded her in all directions. In all her explorations with Hiccup, they'd never passed through such a seascapeâ€”a fortress of fog that concealed small, jagged iron-dark islands separated by treacherous, rushing channels of water. But she'd heard stories.

The Mazy Multitude was among the most dangerous locations in the already dangerous Barbaric Archipelago. It was home to Poisonous Terrors, the deadlier cousin of the Terrible Terrors, hordes of aggressive Changewings and murders of Whispering Death that fixated and pursued until their prey was utterly consumed. But worst of all, Fishlegs had continued over one meal of many in the Meade Hall, were the Outcastsâ€”rapists, oathbreakers and those deemed too bloodthirsty even by Viking standards.

She'd laughed at Fishlegs's breathless story. With her belly full of mead and chicken and Hiccup a warm, smiling presence at her side, she had told Fishlegs that now she definitely had to visit the Mazy Multitude.

Hiccup never had granted that request, no matter how many times she'd suggested it.

The only warning she had was the eerie rush of water before a Whispering Death dove only a few feet from her. Its tail lashed out and hit her hard enough to send her tumbling through the water.

By the time Merida emerged from the choppy waves, spluttering, the Whispering Death had already disappeared in the fog bank. She heard guttural shouts and curses as her kidnappers searched the area for her. She knew they must be close but the fog made everything seem indistinct and hard to hear.

It had been a calculated risk to dive from the dragon, but Merida had no other alternative. No one knew that the enemy rode on dragons and Merida had to slow her pursuers down enough so that a rescue party from Berk could be organized and track her scent. The Mazy Multitude's own natural defences worked for her as well as it did for her kidnappers. Without a tracking dragon, they would need to search for her by sight or sound, both of which were severely hampered by the dense fog.

She just needed to avoid dying from the cold and shock.

Holding a hand against her throbbing side, Merida tried to swim toward a faint line of beach in the distance. It had to be close. It needed to be close.

Splashes of water and roars filled the air but none came near. Merida gritted her teeth. After what seemed like hours of swimming, the beach slowly resolved itself to a firm shape. Nearly sobbing with frustration and pain, Merida swam harder.

"There she is!"

Despairing, she looked back. A low flying Whispering Death and its rider streaked towards her. Using her remaining strength, she dove low just as the Whispering Death rushed past. Her kidnapper's hand didn't even come close. Cursing, he swung back around and shouted at her to remain still.

Merida felt a small bubble of hysterical laughter well up in her. That too had been another calculated risk. Though able to ride dragons, Merida guessed that they hadn't developed the same skill as the Berk dragon riders. If her kidnappers wanted her, they'd need to dive into the water as she did

But the water was a risk she had grossly underestimated. The cold stole every feeling from her limbs. Even with adrenaline pumping through her system, she felt her heartbeat slow. Her eyelids felt heavy. Her kidnappers might end up with her corpse after all.

A familiar shriek pierced the air, followed by the rumble of thunder and electric blue flashes of light. Merida felt a small bubble of hope pierce the freezing numbness. Explosions of sulphurous flame lit the fog from within and Merida could barely make out a night-dark blur and several rounded shapes plummeting to the water with a sickening crack.

The blur resolved itself into Toothless's beloved features, green eyes slitted and searching, and wings extended low over the water. On its backâ€

"Hiccup." Her voice was barely above a croak. It must have been enough; Toothless's head immediately snapped to her direction. Hiccup turned almost at the same time.

"Merida!"

He _had come._ He had come despite everythingâ€"politics, cultures and common senseâ€"indicating otherwise. He had come though the distance between them was huge, impenetrable. Kingdoms and ranks and

obligations separated them as much as the leagues in between them their homes. So there was only one thing to do.

When he leaned away from Toothless, hand held out and face fierce, Merida reached out for him. Warm fingers enclosed hers in an iron grip and plucked her from the numbing sea and into the sky.

Hiccup might have seemed scrawny compared to his peers, but there was only solid strength in his arm as he swung her into the seat behind him. She slumped against his back, hands circling his waist loosely. She felt his hand on top of hers, felt his fingers squeeze her own. She gasped as if only then had she been able to take breath. She buried her face in his back, trying to soak in as much of his warmth as she could. Her shivering was becoming more violent.

Through chattering teeth, she heard him shouting, "You'll be all right. We'll be in Berk soon."

She didn't respond, too numb and exhausted.

"Merida?" His fingers gripped hers tight again. "Merida, answer me!"

She tried to nod, but everything felt stiff. There was a moment's silence thenâ€

"For Thor's sake, why'd you jump into the ocean? Of all the boneheaded things I've seen, and I've seen a lot since I'm a Vikingâ€

That got her blood going. "Why didn't you come faster?" she snapped through chattering teeth. "You said Toothless was the fastest dragon in the archipelago. Did you stop for breakfast on the way?"

Below them, Toothless gave an offended rumble. Merida didn't see it, but she knew Hiccup had automatically patted his friend's side. "Pay no mind to the crazy Highlander, Toothless. She doesn't know any better."

"No?" If she wasn't so preoccupied with trying to keep warm, she would have throttled him. "Then I suppose the crazy Highlander didn't notice the banner of the murdering Vikings who kidnapped me. I don't suppose she knows who is attacking the settlements on the northern islands. I don't suppose she attempted to slow down her kidnappers so she could give her particularly slow rescuer enough time to catch up."

"You know who's behind the attacks?" He twisted so he could peer back at her. Plastered to his back, Merida glared at him, and then softened. His face was haggard and his eyes were bloodshot. He must have flown a whole day without rest to catch up to her. Now that she was a little warmer, she noticed that he wasn't wearing his armour either. He was only wearing his long sleeved, green tunic and she realized she must have soaked him too.

She wished she had the strength to let him go.

"Don't," he said shortly as if reading her mind.

"Butâ€

"If you force me to tell our dads that you died from cold _after_ I rescued you, I'll never live it down. Then I'll go to Hel and drag you back by the hair myself."

"Mag Mell," she corrected automatically, giggling.

"Whatever," Hiccup snapped. "See, this is what I mean Toothless. Even when she's more icicle than human, she takes a breath to correct me."

"My dying words will be, 'You got it wrong, Hiccup.'"

"You are _not_ allowed to joke about that." Merida couldn't see his face because he'd already faced forward. She couldn't picture his expression. She'd never heard him so grim or stern. "If you die, I will literally go out of my fricking mind."

She didn't know what to say to that.

"You'll ruin my glorious Viking return."

"Put like that, I might expire on the spot just to see you sweat." She laughed breathlessly.

"Stubborn."

"Know-it-all."

"Foolish!"

"Take off your belt!"

"_What?" _Hiccup turned back to stare at her again, face red.

"I'm gonna lose my fingers if I keep them out in the wind, you numpty." The rushing wind soaking through her wet clothing was making her feel almost as cold as being in the ocean did. Her fingers around his waist were already numb.

Hiccup paused then grunted in acknowledgement. In a few moments, the belt around his green tunic had been loosened. Immediately, her hands dug underneath his shirt and pressed itself against his abdomen. She felt him jump slightly and then the muscles underneath her fingertips stilled.

Hiccup cleared his throat. "I'd stop to build a fire, but I can't know how many are in the area or what dragons might be attracted."

"I know." With a small sigh, she pressed herself fully against him, body to body. "I'll find some other way to get warm. Just get us home."

Hiccup's concentration was completely fractured, whereas before every scrap of thought had been focused completely on rescuing Merida. As soon as the message had arrived from Berk that the princess had been taken, he hadn't stopped moving, hadn't paused to ask his father for his help or approval, hadn't considered what his actions at the Thing

might represent. He hadn't even stopped to wear armor. He'd simply picked up his sword Inferno and left.

Now, their situation was still dire. Odin knew how many hostile dragon riders were circling the area. Equally deadly were the wild dragons inhabiting the Mazy Multitudes. They couldn't slow down; they couldn't fight. Any noise might attract unwanted attention. The only thing they could do was fly.

If she hadn't had the guts or the stupidity to dive into the water to slow downâ€”

Hiccup rubbed her arm absently through his shirt. It wasn't the first time she'd been this close to him. From the very beginning she'd invaded his personal space then retreated, made it difficult to breathe for her closeness and fire and equally difficult to look away for her absence. As their friendship had deepened, she'd thought nothing of touching him. A hand bumping against his stomach, fingers entwined with his, an embrace that lasted mere seconds but lingered for days. It had only been after arrival in Berk, after they'd both stormed and raged against each other, that he'd finally had the courage to do the sameâ€”to hold her hand firmly in his hand, to let his fingers drag ghostlike over her arm for attention and to let his arms enfold her in a dance. It was as terrifying and as natural as free fall.

This was different.

The soaked fabric of their clothes did little to hide the softness of her curves pressed against his back, the gentle rise and fall of her abdomen, the length of her legs pressed firmly against his. He was as desperately aware of her as if she was a sword held against his neck. His breath hitched and his trousers felt a little tight.

He nearly jumped out of the seat when Merida's hands began to trace slow, deliberate circles below his navel.

"Merida?" His voice definitely cracked. Toothless flicked an ear back, curious.

"G-gotta k-k-keep warm." Her voice was faint over the wind, exhausted. She nuzzled his back and made the space between his shoulders where her breath puffed out tingle.

"Smart." His fingers found her hands and gently pulled them higher. "Err, just not that area. I'mâ€” I'm ticklish."

Her body quaked with cold, but now she rocked herself back and forth, sliding against him. "G-got-ta k-keepâ€”"

Heat and fear pulsed through Hiccup and made his mouth go dry. Her fingers had drifted below his navel again. He shook himself, desperately trying to reign in his scattered thoughts. This was ridiculous, utterly inappropriate and extremely bad timing. Merida could die and all he could think about was her body?

He was a terrible friend.

"Keep close to the ground, bud," he murmured. "They're gonna expect us in the sky. It'll take longer but they won't notice." The Night

Fury crooned low, eyes fixed ahead. Pillars of rock materialized from the fog. Hiccup calculated the distance and knew he'd have to do some quick maneuvering to avoid it. Normally not a problem, but since he had a shivering Merida at his backâ€¦

"Merida, the ride is gonna be a little bumpy ahead. Hang on tight." There was a murmur of what might have been acknowledgement, but he couldn't hear over the wind. He rubbed her arms reassuringly before turning his attention ahead.

Merida didn't know how long they'd been flying. Her awareness had narrowed down to Toothless taking them away on swift wings and Hiccup, solid and safe and _warm _in front of her. She concentrated on ignoring the rush of wind, the biting cold in the air, the pulse and pull of the waters below. If she didn't, she'd start trembling even harder.

Instead, she focused on Hiccup. The dark green fabric was scratchy against her cheek but underneathâ€”the scent of leather, of ocean wind, of air crackling after a lightning strike. She knew she'd never be able to smell any of those things without being reminded of him.

Hiccup leaned forward and Merida moved with him. Her head slumped against his back, felt the firm muscles underneath her fingertips tense and his rump push firmly against her. It was less mirroring his position as it was senselessly, even helplessly, following his own actions. Even in a better condition, she didn't know if she could manage to stay on a dragon flying through the myriad of pillars and islets in the Berserker home.

Toothless banked sharply left then right. Gravity shifted. Hiccup held her arms against his waist, anchoring her to him, and she felt Toothless's acceleration push her back, almost out of her seat. They passed through what felt like a drizzle or a small ocean waveâ€”everything, even Hiccup, was soaked again.

Asked later, Merida couldn't recount how long they flew or what they passed through. Her eyes were closed for most of the journey. The only thing she remembered was Hiccup blazing warmth through the journey, how she'd tried to wrap herself around him as much as she could, arms and legs and all, and the slide of their bodies against each other as he shifted positions to accommodate for Toothless's gears.

Merida did remember desire, though.

"Merida?" Hiccup's hand held hers and the other gently rubbed her leg. He turned to look at her again and she felt the movement all throughout her body. "We're back."

She hadn't noticed. All Merida cared about was the solid, warm length of him pressed against her. She felt nothing but lithe, powerful muscle against herâ€”strong enough to drag her from the ocean, strong enough to ride a dragon, strong and quick enough to match her in a dance or a duel.

"When did youâ€”?" She broke off, confused, and distracted. He had begun rubbing her leg again.

"Merida, we need to get you into dry clothes." His hand disappeared against her leg and she felt him unhook his leg from Toothless's saddle. "Come on."

"D-don't stop," she whispered.

"Don't stop what?"

"Touching me."

* * *

><p>Author's Note:

1. Funny story. This was supposed to be for mericcup week, but the original prompt ("If you die, I will literally go out of my mind"-Teen Wolf) didn't make it to the final rounds. I found out AFTER mericcup week started, lol. Yes, dear readers, I'm a regular Sherlock Holmes.

2. I handwave a whole bunch of practical physics (as much practical physics apply in a world of dragons and dragon riders) to get Merida and Hiccup where they need to be. Also fully aware that Merida would warm up faster if she was in the front seat but-never let it be said that I let practicality get in the way of smut!

3. But most of all, I hope ya'll enjoy :)

This was first posted on tumblr under the username nessalk. Drop by and say hi! Thank you to everyone who read/reviewed/favorited/followed the story! EXTRA SPECIAL THANK YOU to my new beta nothingnothingtralala. This chapter is particularly shiny and grammatically error-free because of her :)

15. Maybe I Could Be

Disclaimer: I don't own Hiccup or Merida, obviously. I'm not making any money off this. Both characters and the movies they come from belong to Dreamworks and Disney, respectively. If you really want to see something to blow you away, go watch the movies. Then think about these two interacting. Then you'll see what I mean.

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><p>LIMINALITY

**Maybe I Could Be
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><p>The wine burned, heady and strong, down his stomach. It was his third cup and already, his fingers tingled. The stuff must have been potent to affect someone who had drunk nothing but bitter ale and Gobber's deadly brew all his life. Lady Atilis had broken out her best vintage for the feast.<p>

The haunting music of the flute resounded in the darkness of the window seat, somehow amplified by the tiny space enclosed by the

burgundy curtains. Hiccup imagined he could feel it thrum in his blood. It made him feel wistful somehow like being alone but for Toothless in an utterly grey sky chasing an unreachable horizon. The bagpipes joined for a rushing crescendo, and Hiccup recognized the notes in the song. It was Niall Dingwall's favorite ballad; what was it called? _For the Love of a Pâ€"_

The obscuring curtain twitched back and at once the noise of the revelryâ€"of men and women talking, of platters being set down, of servants weaving their way through the pressâ€"rushed in and scattered his thoughts.

"You left." Merida held the curtain back, her scarlet curls and slim shoulders outlined by the glow of the great fireplace, and her mouth twitched.

"Can't overload them with my presence right away." The words came easily to his mouth even as he felt the flush on his cheeks. "It's reputation-building rule number six: leave them wanting more. Haven't you been paying attention to Osgar's lessons?"

"Osgar also advises strutting in the kitchen so you may view your stride from many angles on the silverware." She cocked her hip and her brow rose provocatively. "Am I going to find you in the kitchen later tonight?"

"Already did it this morning." He felt a corresponding smirk tug at the corner of his mouth. "Hiccup - 2, Merida - 0. If you're not careful, I'm gonna be way more popular than you by night's end."

Her laughter was a breath of fresh air in the stuffy, suddenly claustrophobic hall in Eilean Donan. She let the curtains fall back into place behind her and she collapsed on to the seat next to him. Or at least she tried to. The golden gown embroidered with pearl was designed to draw the eye and catch the firelight. It was not, unfortunately, designed to let its wearer collapse into anything softer than a throne.

"You can take the prize; I don't care anymore," she groaned. "I haven't sat down for the past three hours. I feel like I've danced with every single man in the room."

She probably had. From the moment the Princess had descended the stairs into the Great Hall, there hadn't been a moment when her presence wasn't sought after or her hand hadn't been promised to another. It was an escalation of the attentions paid to her as princess and the grace with which she handled said attentions was nothing short of miraculous. Whatever gods Helen and Sima prayed to had been powerful.

You should include yourself in the praise as much as me or Lady Helen, milord, Hiccup recalled Sima saying earlier. _Begging your pardon, but she wasn't having none of Lady Helen's help before she met you. I thinkâ€| you made her open to it. _

Hiccup had scoffed at Sima's suggestion. A barbarian Vikingâ€"not just any Viking but "the curse of Berk"â€"made a Princess open to hosting feasts or receiving lords of the realm?

You made her less afraid, Sima had said firmly at the open doubt in

his face.

Hiccup hadn't held much water with that either. Merida was ridiculously brave to the point of insanityâ€”not the ice-cold fearlessness he'd seen in Berserker warriors or the calculated unfeeling of the Roman general. Her voice cracked after Elinor delivered a cutting lecture; her eyes were glassy as she fired arrow after arrow in the archery range after a long day at court.

Marrying one of the young lords would be like swallowing broken glass, she'd once told him, _I wouldn't know who I was afterâ€”how I could piece myself back_. But what had she been doing in Lady Ailis's estate these past few months? In this party? She'd made great friends of her suitors; she'd established her own court and her own supporters. She stepped into an arena she'd been terrified of and made herself a very capable, very dangerous player.

He'd never known a woman less likely to run away from anything while Hiccup? He disappeared into the window seats as soon as he could.

"You're overthinking again," Merida muttered. "I can hear the gaming beads rattling in that skull of yours."

"I was just counting how many men you danced with versus how many women _and_ men I danced with." He nudged the small gap in the curtains shut with his foot. In the silence, her warmth was suddenly much more noticeable. "Just to keep it factual."

She snorted and it was so like the girl who spent her free afternoons helping him with his secret inventions at the castle forge. "Osgar's lot seem more than passing fond of you. Why is that?"

"Good taste?"

"Hiccup." She peeked up at him. Her voice was low and earnestâ€”not at all what he'd been expecting. "Do you really not know what's going on betweenâ€”|" Her forefinger traced a small circle in the air.

"Between?" He took a sip of wine to alleviate his suddenly parched tongue.

She stared up at him, eyes the vivid blue of her Highland lochs. "Petir's very handsome."

"Who?" Brow furrowed, he mentally reviewed all the eligible young men at the feast; there were just too many to keep tabs on them all. He was certain she'd never mentioned a Petir in her letters. "And since when did you care about looks?"

"Never mind."

"Wait, you mean Petir as in Osgar's right-hand man?" Hiccup let the doubt creep in to his voice. The boy was as fair as Osgar was dark; his features sharp and clean cut; and he was certainly the nicest of all the young nobles to Hiccupâ€”going so far as to invite him to hunts or games. But besides that Osgar out-preened him, Hiccup couldn't see much difference between the two. "He's fine, I guess."

Um, isn't that awkwardâ€”you choosing Petir over Osgar? How would that go over with the Macintosh?"

A slow grin spread on her face. Hiccup traced its progress, attempting as always to puzzle out the truth that lay between her words and her actions. The princess was seldom deliberately deceptive; her emotions ran too strong and true for that. Rather, the challenge lay in deciphering the clues correctly. Was that relief in her smile? A hint of devilry in her eyes? "Just wanted your opinion of him, is all."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"We'd be here all winter long."

"Hah, hah." He tugged at a curl of her hair. "Shouldn't you be worried about your esteemed guests?"

"Not at all." A passing shadow loomed large over the drawn curtain. Merida nudged him until they were both crowded into the corner of the window seat. Her hair, loose as she preferred it, brushed his arm and her breath fanned his cheek. "Osgar, Niall and Alan are actually being of great help. I can't imagine holding this feast without them. I just wishâ€”they were more like you."

Ignoring how his heart skipped a beat, Hiccup asked glibly, "A Viking hiding in the corner?"

She jabbed him in the side. This close, it hurt worse than he'd like to admit.

"A convenient punching bag for violent princesses?"

"Shut up!" she hissed before laughing and Hiccup started laughing too. Their shoulders shook together until a servant drew the curtains back. The woman started in surprise upon finding the Princess and her guest and quickly retreated with murmured apologies. Merida hid her face on his shoulder to stifle her laughter and Hiccup tried very hard to ignore the softness of her. "I meant that you travel lightly. I can't invite Osgar, Niall or Alan to anything like this without having to invite half their court. The same goes for any of the lords, really. I invited Lord Dougall because he is a close ally of Lord Mackenzie. I invited Lord Mackenzie because he is enemies with Lord Heughan and I invited Lord Heughan because he supports Lord MacDorieâ€”" and on and on and on.

Hiccup's head swirled at the names she dropped, their interweaving relationships and how, altogether, it became the tapestry that was the nobility of the Highlands. It was like an intricate ecosystem of dragonsâ€”each species interdependent on others in surprising ways to maintain a delicate balance that affected all. But still, there was one member of the throng she hadn't given a reason for inviting.

"So why ask me then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I get why you invited all these lords and their followers. But I don't get how a Viking wins you points or gets you anything."

"You're here for the most important reason of all, of course."

"What's that?"

She gave him a puzzled look, as if she couldn't decide if he was being really ignorant or deliberately obtuse. "Because you make me happy."

His heart lurched; his lungs seemed starved for air; and his stomach contracted. It wasn't the first time and, he realized with a sinking sensation, it wouldn't be the last time she turned his world upside down as casually as she devastated targets with her bow and arrows.

Don't think about it, Hiccup, he told himself sternly. _Don't be stupid._ She was so far beyond him. It was laughable that they were even friends, that they wrote to each other constantly, that they spent almost all his visits together, that she preferred his company above the great throng of Highlands lord and yetâ€| and yet she kept saying these things. Did it mean anything?

"Merida," he breathed, "I need toâ€"

"Your Highness, may I have this dance?"

"Of course, Lord Jamie." She held out her hand automatically, smile in place, but Hiccup noticed the barest slump of her shoulders. He doubted anyone else caught her weariness.

Lord Jamie swept her into a dance and she was once again a part of the glittering throngâ€"the Princess of DunBroch, the future wife to a high lord, the mistress of a great clan, and as untouchable as the northern lights.

Then she caught his eye as she executed a turn, winked and jerked her head to the floor. She mouthed, _Coming_?

* * *

><p>Author's Note:

Sorry for the long wait, folks! I'm having a phenomenally bad month (guy rear-ends me on the freeway and accuses me of cutting him off! Among other things). However, to make up for the hiatus, I will be posting another chapter of Liminality (the sequel, per se, to this chapter), and the new chapter of Crossing the Horizon this week.

Fun tidbit: the music Hiccup listens to in the beginning is from Braveheart and it's called _For the Love of a Princess_. This piece was inspired by _Anywhere But Here (Orchestral Version)_ by Safetysuit and the title is a phrase from the song. Seriously. Listen to that song while reading this chapter and let the feels commence! I hope ya'll enjoy :)

Originally posted on tumblr for mericcup month under the username moonshotsandarchimedeslever. Drop by and say hi! Thank you to everyone who read/reviewed/favorited/followed the story!

16. All You Ever Dreamed

Disclaimer: I don't own Hiccup or Merida, obviously. I'm not making any money off this. Both characters and the movies they come from belong to Dreamworks and Disney, respectively. If you really want to see something to blow you away, go watch the movies. Then think about these two interacting. Then you'll see what I mean.

* * *

><p>LIMINALITY

**All You Ever Dreamed
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* * *

><p>The words hit her like a punch to the gut. It was all the more devastating for the gentleness of his touch, for the careful way he guided her steps, for his determination to perform the dance as flawlessly as they'd practiced months ago.<p>

We don't do that, Merida. Not to each other.

Of course he wouldn't. Hiccup was kind, generous, clever and patient. He'd never use a friend to lash out against another. He wasn't monstrously selfish like she was.

Her focused fury vanished like a flame snuffed by a gust of wind. Her manic energy collapsed until she was tired, terrified and so very guilty in his arms. But no longer confused, at least. He had a way of ordering her thoughts and making everything so much clearer. That was why she'd refused to answer his questions and why she'd snapped when he probed further.

"I'm sorry." To her horror, tears that she'd banished for the night began to leak into the corners of her eyes. She promised herself she'd never show the Court her weakness. But how could she pretend in front of Hiccup? "You're right. I was being pig-headed. I justâ€¦everyone's expecting my answer by the end of the night and I am _so_ _frightened_. I don't have an answerâ€¦" not one they'll like! You weren't here and then Andresâ€¦he just ignored me. I know you think it's some silly fancy, but he was the first person to really believe that I couldâ€¦" Her breath caught in her throat, and when she finally forced it through it sounded too much like a sob. "I am so stupid for believing I could change my fate."

"You are not stupid." Hiccup's arm lingered around her waist and did not push her out into the floor where a circle of maidens already danced. They paused, frozen in a colorful tableau of dancers in the middle of the Great Hall of DunBroch. "Foolhardy, often, but never stupid."

She lifted her face to meet his. The music faded into silence, the revelers clapped and exchanged compliments, but they did nothingâ€¦simply breathed each other in.

"Well done, Hiccup," said Kincaid. "You dance like you've been doing it since you were born. Princess, don't youâ€¦are you all

right?"

Before Merida could even think of how to respond, to put her armor back in place, Hiccup took her hand and lead her away. She glimpsed Kincaid's startled look before he was lost in the crowds. Hiccup didn't stop until they reached a shadowed alcove.

"Thank you. Iâ€"

"I know." Because he always understood her. He always saw through her. He always saw her. He pretended to observe the party while she tried to breathe through the tight knot in her chest. In a much lighter tone, he remarked, "You didn't think I'd miss your birthday, did you?"

"I didn't hear from you for weeks," she laughed shakily. "I was half planning a daring rescue mission."

Hiccup snorted, but there was something dark, something nervous in the sound that made her look up. Now that they were alone and without the distraction of a dance, she noticed how different he looked. He wore a dark, fitted leather gambeson she'd never seen before; the silver buckles shaped like dragons' heads gleamed in the light. Etched across his left breast, where his heart would be, was the dragon with one-tail fin. The red symbol made a startling contrast against the darkness of the gambeson. But the changes went deeper than that. There was utter weariness in his stance; his eyes were haunted and a bruise shadowed his chin. He looked taller, strangerâ€"even dangerous.

"What happened?" she whispered, fingers touching the bruise gently.

"Fell off a cliff," he muttered.

"And landed on your face?" she said, a familiar exasperation in her tone.

"In the water." His hand caught hers and lowered it gently between them.

"Hiccupâ€"

"Merida, _don't_, " he said and his eyes met hers. Stern but also sad. So unbearably sad.

Guilt flooded through her. "I'm sorry. You've done nothing wrong and here I am doubting you."

"I've done plenty of wrong and you know it. We've usually done it together."

"That's mischief and you know it. You stood by me when my suitors thought I was mad; you helped me find solutions that benefitted the kingdom without sacrificing who I am; you befriended a lonely, stubborn, _selfish_ wreck of a girl. I don't even know why you put up withâ€"

One long finger rested feather-light on her lips.

She looked up, startled into his gentle green eyes. Her favorite color.

"That should be obvious." He tucked a stray curl back against her ear. At her furrowed brow, he said, "You make me happy."

* * *

><p>Author's Note:

Originally posted on tumblr under the username moonshotsandarchimedeslevers for mericcup month. This functions as a sequel of sorts to MAYBE I COULD BE. Fun tidbit: MAYBE I COULD BE and ALL YOU EVER DREAMED forms one of my favorite lines from the song _Anywhere but Here (Orchestral Version) _by SafetySuit, which inspired these two chapters. That song hits me with so much mericcup feels, y'all. Do you guys have favorite mericcup songs?

MAYBE I COULD BE takes place during a winter feast in Eilean Donan. ALL YOU EVER DREAMED occurs during Merida's birthday feast in the summer (roughly six months after MAYBE I COULD BE and a full year after CtH-Uneasy Alliances). ALL YOU EVER DREAMED is part of the midseason finale (as it were) for Crossing the Horizon.

If you wanna hear previews, headcanons or general ramblings, drop by and say hi on tumblr! Thank you to everyone who read/reviewed/favorited/followed the story!

End
file.